

Message Text

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43

ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 ARAE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-01

INR-07 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 A-01 OPR-01 SY-04 OC-05 CCO-00 AID-05 PC-01

SCCT-01 IO-10 OMB-01 FEAEE-00 EB-07 COME-00 TRSE-00

SIL-01 LAB-04 INT-05 /100 W

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P 111720Z FEB 75

FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7017

INFO AMCONSUL CALI

AMCONSUL MEDELLIN

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E.O. 11652: NA

TAGS: PINT, ELAB, CO

SUBJECT: CIVIC STRIKE IN BARRANCABERMEJA

1. A CIVIC STRIKE BEGAN AT 3:00 AM FEB 10 IN BARRANCABERMEJA, THE PRINCIPAL OIL REFINERY SITE IN COLOMBIA. THE STRIKE HAD BEEN ANNOUNCED BY CIVIC LEADERS ON JAN 30 (BOGOTA 1058) TO PROTEST THE POOR LIVING CONDITIONS IN THAT CITY, PARTICULARLY THE POOR QUALITY OF WATER, AND THE ALLEGED FAILURE OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT TO TAKE ADEQUATE CORRECTIVE ACTION.

2. IN ANTICIPATION OF THE STRIKE, COLOMBIAN MILITARY FORCES OCCUPIED THE CITY ON FEB 9 PRINCIPALLY TO GUARD THE ECOPETROL OIL REFINERY AGAINST POSSIBLE SABOTAGE. AT THE ONSET OF THE STRIKE, SCATTERED ACTS OF VIOLENCE OCCURRED, BUT MILITARY AND POLICE AUTHORITIES APPEAR TO HAVE THE TOWN UNDER CONTROL. ACCORDING TO NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS, SANTANDER GOVERNOR OSCAR MARTINEZ SALAZAR

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SAID THAT BISHOP OF BARRANCABERMEJA, MONSENOR

BERNARDO ARANGO HENAO, ONE OF THE ORIGINAL SUPPORTERS OF THE STRIKE, DENOUNCED THE STRIKE MOVEMENT, PARTICULARLY THE ACTS OF VIOLENCE IN WHICH SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED.

THE GOVERNOR ALSO ACCUSED COMMUNISTS OF TAKING OVER THE STRIKE.

3. IN A TELEVISION INTERVIEW LATE FEB 10, MINISTER OF GOVERNMENT CORNELIO REYES DENOUNCED THE STRIKE LEADERS FOR CHANGING THEIR DEMANDS FOLLOWING A WEEK-LONG MEETING IN BOGOTA BETWEEN THE CIVIC LEADERS AND THE MINISTER DESIGNED TO FIND A STRIKE-AVOIDING COMPROMISE. HE LISTED SEVERAL PROJECTS PLANNED OR UNDERWAY IN BARRANCABERMAJA AND ASSERTED THAT THE GOC WOULD NOT BOW TO THE STRIKE PRESSURES.

4. ECOPETROL OFFICIALS TOLD THE EMBASSY FEB 11 BASIC FURLS PRODUCTION AT THE REFINERY IS NORMAL, BUT THAT THE PETROCHEMICAL PLANT IS FUNCTIONING AT A REDUCED PACE. THESE OFFICIALS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF THE STRIKE ON THE REFINERY FOR AT LEAST TWO REASONS: (A) THEY FEAR THE STRIKE COULD GET OUT OF HAND, TOUCHING OFF A WILDCAT STRIKE BY THE ECOPETROL UNION (USO) WHICH MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO USE THE CIVIC STRIKE AS A PRELIMINARY MANEUVER FOR NEGOTIATIONS WITH ECOPETROL SCHEDULED TO BEGIN IN EARLY MARCH (B) PUBLICITY ABOUT THE STRIKE AND ITS POSSIBLE EFFECT ON THE REFINERY COULD SPARK GASOLINE HOARDING. IN RECENT WEEKS, ECOPETROL HAS BEEN PRODUCING MINIMAL AMOUNTS OF MOTOR GASOLINE IN ORDER TO CONCENTRATE ON JET FUEL WHICH HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN IN SHORT SUPPLY. PANIC BUYING OF AUTOMOBILE GASOLINE AT THIS TIME WOULD QUICKLY DRY UP SUPPLIES.

5. COMMENT: CIVIC STRIKES IN COLOMBIA ARE A COMMON OCCURRENCE. THIS PARTICULAR ONE IS SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE OF THE OIL REFINERY. IT IS LIKELY THAT IF THE STRIKE THREATENS THAT INSTALLATION THE GOC WILL DECLARE A STATE OF SEIGE IN BARRANCA. THIS MEASURE HAS BEEN USED OFTEN BY COLOMBIAN AUTHORITIES.

6. IN A PROBABLY UNRELATED INCIDENT THE BOGOTA PRESS REPORTED FEB 7 THAT UNIDENTIFIED PERSONS HAD SLIGHTLY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DAMAGED THE TRANSANDEAN OIL PIPELINE IN PUTUMAYO, IN SOUTHERN COLOMBIA. THE PIPELINE IS OPERATED BY THE TROPICAL PETROLEUM COMPANY, A SUBSIDIARY OF TESACO. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS MILITARY TROOPS WERE DISPATCHED FROM PASTO TO GUARD THE INSTALLATIONS OF TROPICAL. VAKY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptoning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRESS COMMENTS, LABOR STRIKES, MILITARY OCCUPIED AREAS, LIVING CONDITIONS, BARRANCABERMEJA, CIVIL DISORDERS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 11 FEB 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975BOGOTA01320
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750049-0858
From: BOGOTA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750255/aaaabxda.tel
Line Count: 113
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 SEP 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <05 SEP 2003 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <19 NOV 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CIVIC STRIKE IN BARRANCABERMEJA
TAGS: PINT, ELAB, CO, (ARANGO HENAO, BERNARDO)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006